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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (SUBJECT)

DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM
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SUBJECT: SRAP HOLBROOKE, CJCS ADM MULLEN DISCUSS RECONCILIATION,
SECURITY WITH ULEMA COUNCIL, TRIBAL ELDERS

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d)

Summary

1. (SBU) Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) Holbrooke and CJCS Admiral Mullen discussed security and reconciliation with the Ulema Council and, in a separate meeting, with Pashtun tribal elders. In both meetings, SRAP Holbrooke began the meeting by articulating the U.S. neutrality policy with regard to the August 20 Afghan elections. Both the religious scholars and tribal elders emphasized the importance of reconciliation efforts in advance of elections. While they focused on security, the elders and religious scholars declared that long-term solutions will be found at the negotiating table.

Clerics on Need for Reconciliation

2. (SBU) Chairman of the Ulema (religious scholars) Council (UC) Mawlawi Fazl Hadi Shinwari told Ambassador Holbrooke and Admiral Mullen April 6 that Afghanistan needed the support of the international community for peace initiatives begun by Afghan Taliban (TB) who had reached out to the UC. Reconciliation, he added, should not wait until after the elections as some had suggested. Shinwari believed there were two types of Taliban: those who believed in the Taliban ideology, and those who were either forced to support it, or who joined out of fear or frustration. He believed the second group comprised over half of the Taliban, and that they could be turned if someone were to reach out to them. Shinwari believed that President Karzai was the man to reach out to them, as he had been doing a great job in that area so far. (Note: Shinwari is a long-time personal friend and political ally of Karzai.)

Tribal Elders Also Call for Reconciliation

3. (SBU) Similar themes were echoed during a roundtable discussion with Pashtun tribal elders from the southeast Afghanistan provinces of Khost, Paktia, Paktika, and Wardak. The Taliban, they said, are not necessarily supporters of Mullah Omar, but rather are Afghans seeking to create an Islamic system of government. The elders argued that too little effort has been devoted to giving the Taliban an opportunity to engage. They encouraged a renewed attempt (without specifying who should lead these efforts) to reach out to anti-government forces, including renegade warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. When Ambassador Holbrooke noted it would be difficult to reconcile with a man encouraging Afghans to kill NATO soldiers, they responded that Hekmatyar would, of course, need to repudiate such previous statements.

Nonetheless, they stressed, to end this conflict the Afghan government and coalition partners must at some point go to the negotiating table.

Reconciliation and the Elections

14. (SBU) SRAP Holbrooke described U.S. policy in the forthcoming elections, telling the Ulema Council and the elders: "The United States neither supports nor opposes any candidate, including President Karzai, and will work with the GIROA, opposition candidates, the UN and other international supporters of Afghanistan, to conduct free and fair elections on a level playing field." Deputy Chief of the Ulema Council Mawlavi Qiyam-u-Din Kashaf told SRAP and CJCS Mullen he was concerned that some people in Taliban-controlled areas would not be able to vote, which was their right as Afghans. The tribal elders also expressed concern regarding the rate of voter registration in the south-east, claiming it was as low as 30 percent in some provinces. The elders argued for a national loya jirga before the August 20 elections to ensure full national participation in the election by all aspects of Afghan society. Kashaf suggested the conditions the Taliban had set for reconciliation should be kept in mind: 1) immunity from prosecution for those Afghan Taliban who recognized the government; 2) removal from the black list; and 3) all Taliban and political prisoners to be released from the Bagram detention facility. He believed that if the U.S. could persuade the Saudis to act as mediators between the Taliban and the GIROA, peace could be achieved with a judicious application of pressure to both sides. Once peace was agreed on, all Afghans could participate in the elections as reconciled Afghan citizens.

Security and Anti-Radicalization

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15. (SBU) The UC members told Ambassador Holbrooke and Admiral Mullen that Afghanistan needed to establish its own higher religious schools to avoid Afghan youths traveling to Pakistani or Iranian madrassas where they could be radicalized. If there were good Afghan alternatives to foreign madrassas, most Afghan young people would remain in the country. Another part of the solution to radicalized students would be for the IC to pressure the Pakistani military, intelligence services, and government (as well as the Saudis and Iranians) to stop providing direct support for radical madrassas. The tribal elders also pressed the U.S. to take firm action against Pakistan's ISI, which they blamed for support to Al Qaida and the Taliban.

16. (SBU) The tribal elders lamented the negative impact that civilian casualties, house searches, and other coalition force activities were having on the Afghan people's support for U.S. and international efforts. They suggested that some are comparing coalition actions to indiscriminate Soviet practices, and pressed for a new strategy to respond to people's concerns. Admiral Mullen strongly disputed comparisons to the Soviet practices and emphasized the steps the U.S. has taken to minimize civilian casualties, but said that he could not promise civilian casualties would not happen again given the nature of the conflict, including the Taliban practice of hiding in villages. The elders complained about the rapid turn-over of U.S. troops just as they become familiar with cultural or local sensitivities, and recommended longer tours in order to take advantage of lessons learned. The elders also raised concerns, in response to a question from Admiral Mullen, about the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) in Wardak Province, suggesting it was arming rather than disarming local groups. (Comment: The AP3 is in its infancy and the USG is working hard to spread the word to educate the local populations of its benefits. It is interesting to note that the Taliban are fearful of the program as it disrupts their reliance on intimidating the population at the local level.)

17. (U) SRAP's Office cleared on this message.
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